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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000297

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS  
NSC FOR DORMANDY

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: PRO- AND ANTI-GOVERNMENT GROUPS CLAIM VICTORY IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

REF: COLOMBO 107

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the aftermath of the December 26 tsunami, the Maldivian government proceeded with its

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rescheduled Majlis ("Parliament") elections on January 22, an event that occurred largely without incident. Pro- and anti-government groups declared victory, with the anti-government Maldivian Democratic Party claiming its supporters won 18 of the 42 contested seats. Local and international observers highlighted the efforts of the Election Commission to create an environment conducive for voting, but the Commonwealth Expert Team stopped short of calling the elections "free and fair." The Government agreed that there needs to be election reform and seems to embrace the results of the January 22 vote -- opposition candidates and all. End Summary.

Unexpected wins for opposition candidates

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¶2. (C) As the final votes were being tallied January 26, members of the Maldivian Democratic Party met with DCM and poloff to provide their election analysis. They declared that MDP supporters had won 18 of the 42 seats up for election. (Note: The MDP has a habit of co-opting reform-minded politicians, among others, by declaring them pro-MDP even if the individual has not expressed specific support for the group. Given the lack of political parties in Maldives and the tangle of political alliances, it is difficult at best to ascertain the number of pro-MDP winners in the January 22 vote. End Note.) Such a victory was a surprise to party co-founder Mohamed Latheef, who said his best guess before the elections was 14 seats for the MDP candidates. (MDP's Mohamed Nasheed estimated that "hardline supporters" of President Gayoom had won 14-15 seats.)

¶3. (C) MDP-sympathetic candidates won both seats on the capital island of Male' and both seats in the southern Addu Atoll, which represents "the urban population," according to interlocutors. Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) officials told the DCM during a February 2-3 visit to Male' there was no surprise that opposition candidates did well in these areas -- with large youth populations likely dissatisfied with the status quo. GORM officials also noted, however, that voter turnout in urban areas was low, indicating general apathy that anything will change as a result of a fresh parliament.

Amid praise, allegations of voter fraud

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¶4. (U) Officials from the Commonwealth, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the indigenous Maldivian Human Rights Commission (HRC) were deployed on several atolls in addition to voting places on Male' to observe the election. Local and international observers commented on the January 22 elections by citing a variety of positive and negative polling activities. The Commonwealth Expert Team of observers stopped short of calling the election free and fair, instead noting it was "well organized and enabled a large number of people to exercise their right to vote." Observers from the HRC said it was "not an election that in general was free, unbiased or removed from undue influence." In response to the HRC's comments, the Information Ministry replied that it did not accept the claims of the commission and called into question the independence and objectivity of its monitors.

¶5. (C) The HRC and the Commonwealth Expert Team had laudatory comments for the Elections Commissioner and his staff. The HRC praised the efforts of Elections Commissioner Ibrahim Rashad that "in terms of voting, increased the independence given to the citizens." The Commonwealth Expert Team similarly lauded Rashad and called on the government to review the recommendations in its report to further strengthen the electoral system. Ahmed Mujuthaba, HRC Chair, commented to the DCM on February 3 that the Elections Commission has conducted the count fairly and accurately.

16. (C) Despite the success of its candidates, the MDP also countered that the vote was not free or fair, claiming ballot boxes were stuffed while in transit from the atolls to Male' for counting. MDP interlocutors also stated that the GORM used tsunami relief activities to prop up government candidates before the election, e.g., by putting candidate stickers on boxes of relief supplies. Nasheed said that the MDP win, in the face of such election tampering, served to illustrate the strength of support for the group.

17. (C) In February 2-3 discussions with the DCM in Male', GORM officials conceded that there were issues with the election, but characterized the problem as "money politics" in that any candidate, whether pro- or anti-government, with money used personal resources to buy votes, give gifts, and erect lavish posters and billboards. Attorney General Dr. Hassan Saaed told the DCM that he was working on a campaign reform package to address "money politics" to level the divide between candidates with money and those without. The Attorney General added that he hoped to ensure tabulations of future elections took place at the atoll level to increase voter confidence.

Comment

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18. (C) Maldivian citizens seem to be the real winners in the January 22 voting. During the campaign, speculation was rife that the government would engineer the election in its favor or that the opposition would create some public demonstration during the voting. Neither prediction was fulfilled. Instead, voters created the conditions for real progress on democracy-strengthening reforms to take place. Significant numbers of pro-reform candidates won seats in the Majlis. The government, for its part, has accepted the results and is viewing positively the mandate to work with opposition candidates to achieve President Gayoom's reform agenda. Even President Gayoom called all the candidates to congratulate them. The new Majlis will hold its first official session on February 27. We hope the Majlis brings with it a new era in Maldivian democracy that remembers the civil lessons of riots and protests of the past year and a half. End Comment.

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